



## CHURCH of the LIFE-GIVING FOUNTAIN

“ZODOCHOS PEGHE”

GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA

ΙΕΡΑ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΗ ΑΜΕΡΙΚΗΣ

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### God is Wondrous in His Saints

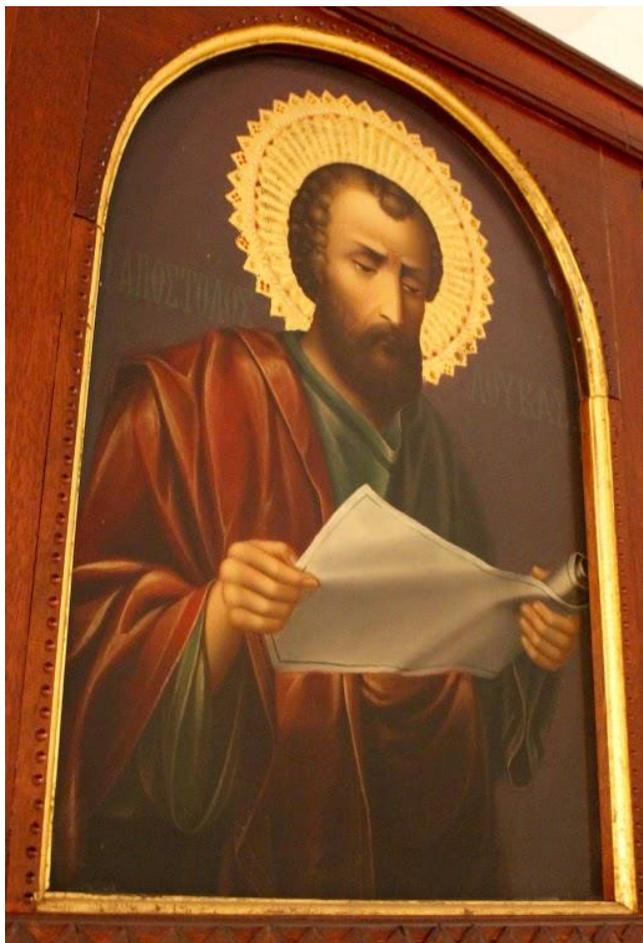
**October 1<sup>st</sup>.** The help of the Most-holy Mother of God has been clearly shown numerous times, to individuals and to nations, in peace and in war, in monastic deserts and in densely populated cities. The event that the Church commemorates and celebrates today confirms the Theotokos' consistent protection of Christian people. On October 1, 911, during the reign of Emperor Leo the Wise, there was an All-night Vigil in the Blachernae Church of the Mother of God in Constantinople. The church was full of people. St. Andrew the Fool-for-Christ was standing in the rear of the church with his disciple Epiphanius. At four o'clock in the morning, the Most-holy Theotokos appeared above the people, holding her omophorion outstretched as a protective covering for the faithful. She was clothed in gold-encrusted purple, and shone with an ineffable radiance, surrounded by apostles, saints, martyrs and virgins. St. Andrew said to Blessed Epiphanius: “Do you see, brother, the Queen and Lady of all praying for the whole world?” Epiphanius replied: “I see, Father, and am struck with amazement!” The Feast of the Protection was instituted to commemorate this event, and to remind us that we can prayerfully receive the unceasing protection of the Most-holy Theotokos in any time of difficulty. It has been celebrated universally in Orthodox churches on this day ever since. In Greece, since World War II, the Protection of the Mother of God has been celebrated on Oct. 28 to commemorate the invocation of Her Protection when the Greek government said NO ! to the Italian ultimatum that the Axis Powers be allowed to occupy Greece.

**October 18<sup>th</sup>** The apostle Luke was born in Antioch. In his youth he was trained in medicine, philosophy and art. He came to Jerusalem where he saw Christ during His earthly life, heard His preaching and saw His wonders. He was numbered among the 70 apostles. After the Resurrection, together with Cleopas he saw the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, which he records in his Gospel (chap. 24). He later accompanied St. Paul on many of his travels. He is mentioned by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Colossians. He wrote his Gospel about 60 AD and later also the Acts of the Apostles. Following the martyrdom of the great Apostle Paul, St. Luke preached the Gospel throughout Italy, Dalmatia, Macedonia and other regions. He painted icons of the Most-holy Theotokos—not just one, but three—and icons of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. Hence, St. Luke is considered to be the founder of Christian iconography. Luke was eighty-four years old when the idolaters tortured him for the sake of Christ and hanged him from an olive tree in the town of Thebes, in Boethia.

**October 23<sup>rd</sup>** Apostle James the brother of the Lord. James is called the brother of the Lord, actually in Greek the brother of God) because he was the son of Joseph by his previous marriage to Salome who died before Joseph was betrothed to Mary. When the

righteous Joseph was near death, he divided his estate among his sons, and wanted to leave a portion to the Lord Jesus, the son of the Most-holy Virgin, but all the other brothers opposed this, not regarding Jesus as their brother. James greatly loved Jesus and declared that he would include Jesus in his share. That is why he is called the Lord's brother. Following His glorious Resurrection, the Lord appeared to him especially, as the Apostle Paul testifies (I Corinthians 15:7). He was Bishop of Jerusalem for thirty years and zealously governed the Church of God. In Acts 15, at the first Council of the Church, held in Jerusalem, it was James who as Bishop of Jerusalem summarized the decisions of the Council.

**October 26<sup>th</sup>** The Great martyr Demetrios is the patron of Thessloniki where he was governor and where he was martyred. Knowing what was awaiting him, Demetrius gave all his goods to his faithful servant Lupus to distribute to the poor, and joyfully awaited his imminent suffering for Christ the Lord. Healing myrrh flowed from the body of the martyr of Christ, curing many of the sick which is why he is called the Myrrh-streaming. He is often shown in icons riding a red horse.





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I have been writing an occasional series on the sacraments, the mysteries of grace, which are found in the prayers of the Church. We began with Christian Initiation through Baptism and Chrismation. We continued with the Divine Liturgy and Holy Communion. We considered the blessing of Holy Water and Marriage and Confession. I have not discussed priestly ordination or monastic tonsure since they do not directly apply to people living in a parish. But it is time to come to the Orthodox Funeral and our understanding of the end of this life and transition to what is beyond. This is not a comfortable matter, yet it is one that concerns us all.

The Orthodox Funeral service is comforting to those grieving the loss of a loved one, yet it is not primarily for them. The funeral is for the deceased; it is their last service in the community of the Church family. This is why an Orthodox Christian funeral should always take place in the Church building. The Orthodox Church does not approve of funerals in other places than the church building, the temple. Of course there are exceptional situations, just as there may be an emergency baptism or a military chaplain celebrating the Divine Liturgy in a battle zone. But the proper place is the Church. The body of the deceased is brought into the Church and the casket is placed in the front with the person as if facing the altar. This is his or her last time coming to the Church, the rest of us are just accompanying. The prayers and petitions are directed to Christ for the forgiveness of the person departed from us and for his or her establishment in the place of the righteous. The hymns are compunctionate, they pierce the heart of everyone in attendance. Thus they also lead us to reflection of the realities of life, and death, and thus toward conversion of our hearts and minds and lives. But when we listen carefully the prayers, significantly, are not for the consolation of us who grieve, but for the welfare of the one who has died.

The funeral service does not stand alone. It is connected with the prayers at the departing of the soul from the body, the Trisagion and memorial services especially on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> days. Many will offer a Trisagion or Memorial on the one year anniversary. We bless graves and offer prayers especially on the Soul Saturdays connected with Lent. The dead are commemorated at every Divine Liturgy. There is the custom, the tradition, of particularly remembering the person at forty Liturgies (which since those are usually the parish Sunday Liturgies means that the person is remembered regularly for about nine months). Rarely, these were 40 consecutive daily Liturgies, but it is nearly impossible today to see daily Liturgies even in monasteries.

**What happens when we die?** A common question. As someone blurted out recently, “God knows”! And in fact He hasn’t told us much.

The only people to be brought back by the Lord, Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus for example, left us no information of their experience beyond the doorway we call death. The Lord tells the faithful thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” And Christ tells a story about a rich man and a beggar. It’s just a story, but it suggests that the dead are aware in some way, experience a condition related to their previous behavior or condition, and care about those still living in this life. We are told that God is the God of the living, not the dead, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. So Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are as alive today as you and I, in the sight of eternal God. We have the experience of saints being active on behalf of those still living here. And there are a few stories/reports of visions regarding the immediate period after the body stops breathing, stories involving angels and or demons.

That’s about all. Some suggestion of continuity. And we have to live with that. The Orthodox Church has never developed the complex legalistic doctrines of purgatory and such found in the Roman Catholic tradition.

There is a strong tradition but not dogma in the Orthodox Church that at death, when the soul is separated from the body, there is some kind of judgement, distinct from the Great Judgement of the Last Day when the Lord will come in Glory. Tradition indicates that the Archangels Michael is the Angel of Death, coming to guard and guide the soul. In traditional Orthodox countries we find icons of the Archangels with scales of judgement fending off a demon beside the person who is at the point of death. There are many references to an accounting, that our actions and even our thoughts in this life have consequences far beyond. This is described as a series of checkpoints, like tollbooths on a toll road, at which the adversary or his minions challenge us regarding sins and the angels defend us. What is clear is that we have some foretaste of our eventual destiny. The Orthodox Church has never accepted the Latin idea of indulgences to buy a way out of purgatory, since we do not have purgatory to start with. We do not attempt to define how prayer for the departed effects their condition. Yet if we pray for people while they are walking around in this familiar life, while would we stop when they pass to that life that we do not understand?

Another analogy might be to birth. The infant is in the mother’s womb. There is plenty of data to indicate that the soon-to-be-born child is aware in some way. If we imagine that there were some communication, the story might go something like this: There is this experience called birth. Little is known or understood about birth or the condition after birth. As an infant in the womb you are alive. You experience mother, she surrounds you and nourishes you. After “birth”, which hurts, you will be “outside” mother. You will be nourished, but not through the familiar umbilical cord. You will receive nourishment through your mouth which is an opening in your face. This is called eating, and when you eat you will experience the taste of food. You will need to breathe. This involves taking in air through your mouth or nose. Air is something like the fluid that now surrounds you in the womb, it makes life possible. Since you are now “outside” mother,

you will be able to “see” mother. This is a whole new way of knowing her. Seeing involves something called light and is done with your eyes. What are eyes? They are the two bumps in your face which you will open to access the light that allows you to see mother and many other things. You can already hear and respond to sound. Once you are born, you will have much more detailed experience of sound and will learn language. Language will further change the way you perceive, understand and communicate. Seeing, by the way, will allow you to meet father. Father is another person, somewhat like mother, with whom you will have a special relationship which is now difficult to describe while you are still in the womb.

If you don't completely understand birth yet or what life is like after birth, don't worry too much. Experience will reveal the truth to you. But actually getting born may be briefly uncomfortable. Are you ready to be born?

